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# **Practices of Male Labour Migration from the Hills of Nepal to India in Development Discourses: Which Pathology?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article provides a critique of authoritative development discourses on the migration of men from Nepal's to India. Drawing from my ethnographic fieldwork at multiple sites, I illustrate how migration is not perceived as a problem by migrants themselves but as an integral practice in people's livelihoods. Many see migration to work in India as an escape from a difficult socio-economic, cultural and familial situation and an opportunity for young men to experience a distant place, experiment with the pleasures and possibilities of consumption, earn and remit money home to fulfil their obligations as responsible men with the hope for upward socio-economic mobility of their families. The authoritative discourses is criticized for failing to comprehend the socio-cultural meanings associated with this form of human movement, and for viewing 'migration' and 'migrants' as aberrant. The presence of a disjuncture between the authoritative discourses and the complex ethnographic reality raises important questions about the politics of migration in international development.

Key words: migration, livelihoods, masculinity, ethnography, development, governmentality, Nepal

## **Introduction**

Meet Lāl Bahādur Kadal. He was thinking of migrating to India for work like most of his fellow villagers have done. But instead, through our support, he participated in seed production training and received vegetable seed. He then organised himself and 11 other local farmers into a Seed Producer Group. With our further support, the Group was introduced to seed traders throughout the country.

In their first year of operation the Group produced and sold around 1 metric tonne of seed. This increased to 7 mt the year after, and in 2005, the Group are contracted to produce 14 mt. The number of seed growers in the village has increased too; there are now 175 members in the Group.

Lal Bahadur earned almost £1,000 from selling radish seed this year, more than 8 times higher than Nepal's per capita income.

(Source:<http://www.dfid.gov.uk/casestudies/files/asia/nepal-seeds.asp>, accessed 15 May 2005)

Touted as a successful intervention this ‘case study’ reflects how rural development discourses frame male labour migration as an undesirable economic choice compared to working on the land, thus tending to place mobility and immobility in a binary opposition. This article addresses the social construction of this binary in the authoritative discourses on the ‘migration-development nexus’ and contrast this with the social-cultural meanings of movement in men’s social experiences as migrants. I show how existing categories and typologies of labour migration in authoritative discourses have served as powerful representations that legitimize interventions and practices which sidelines migrants’ experiences and silence their voices. I argue that ethnography has a great potential to illuminate the socio-cultural dimensions of labour migration, give space to migrants’ perspectives and agency and create the possibility for migrants to voice the meanings they give to their migration experiences.

## **II Interpreting Migration from Nepal: Livelihoods, Masculinity and Governmentality**

Historical evidence suggest male migration in Nepal has a long history dating back to the 18th and 19th centuries when the state policies and agrarian changes forced peasants in the hills to move out of their land and seek their livelihoods elsewhere, including labour migration to India as an option (Caplan, 1990 Regmi, 1978,). Male migration to India began with their recruitment to serve in the army of the Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh, and then systematically into the British army in India. Practices of migration to India are now a part of the life experience of a very large number of Nepali men working in many different sectors. Currently high aspiration exists among men and

women across different socio-economic and cultural groups to migrate in search of livelihood opportunities. It is estimated that around 0.5-1.3 million Nepali migrate India on a temporal basis in search for work (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1995, Seddon et al., 2002), of whom about 90 per cent are believed to be male.

Scholarly accounts have largely viewed male labour migration as: (a) a result of extreme poverty both within Nepal (Blaikie et al., 2002, Blaikie et al., 1980, Shrestha, 1990) and (b) an element in the wider context of labour migration with different patterns, 'seasonal' or otherwise (Bremar, 1996, Bremar, 1985). These studies overemphasize migration as an economic venture and leave out the socio-cultural dimensions that are equally significant. De Haan and Rogaly, (2002) have given more analytical space to the agency of those who move, by developing a socially embedded approach to the analysis of migration through the lens of livelihoods. A few scholars have studied the migration of Nepali to India from this perspective have provided useful insights into how people make decisions about movement and the social, economic and cultural factors that shape their mobility (Adhikari, 2001, Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1995, Thieme, 2006).

Studying migration through the lens of governmentality may help to shed new insights on the shifting rationalities in the nexus of security as livelihood and the control of population movements. 'Governmentality' refers to a broader conception of government which include not only how people are governed but also the 'rationalities' and mentalities behind the ways they are governed (Foucault, 1991). Understanding governmentality requires probing into all calculated ways of thinking and acting that propose to share, regulate or manage the conditions of individuals and population towards specific goals (Inda, 2005). Governmentality designates both state and non-state elements that exercise authority over individuals and populations.

The central concern of governmentality is the security of the populations expressed as *biopower* (Foucault, 1991). Two forms of biopower are: *biopolitics* -- concerned with the population at its collective level, and *anatomo-politics of human body* -- concerned with the individual bodies that compose the population (Inda, 2005: 5-6). Inda shows how the social technology of migration have evolved from the issue of controlling illegal immigration in the 1960s in the United States into a fully blown

hegemonic discourse against undocumented migrants which portrays them as criminal, welfare dependent, fiscal burdens and job stealers. Portrayed as an ethical pathology illegal immigration is to be addressed in a planned way (Inda, 2006, Inda, 2002). This view resonates Durkheim's view on crime and pathology or how society reaffirms its own values by punishment of criminals (Durkheim, 1964).

Likewise the 'governmentality' of 'migration' in what is coined as the 'development process' is a mutual constitution of thinking, controlling and depicting human mobility as a problem. To excavate the subtle construction of the migration-development nexus over time scholars must move away from the idea that planned interventions are purely about domination and trace how dominant discourses identify pathologies (in individuals and populations) in an attempt to correct them through 'development' as a configuration of ideas and imaginations that produces certain effects (Ferguson, 1994, Inda, 2006, Inda, 2005, Mosse, 2005).

The concept of 'livelihood', which views migrants as dynamic actors using tactics to cope with risks imposed by external conditions (De Haan, 1999, Whitehead, 2002) provides a useful space to challenge the governmentality of migration. Defined as the 'diverse ways in which people make a living and build their worlds' (Bebbington, 1999: 2034), the concept of livelihood provides a framework to explore the many meanings people attach to migration and considers the contexts where people seek and expect to find opportunities for experience.

A recent study of seasonal out-migration migration from the state of Jharkhand to other states in India show how young men and women migrate to work in brick kilns due to opportunities for courtship and love (Shah, 2006). Economic and exploitative dimensions of labour migration apart, the study brings to light the interpersonal dimensions of the search for livelihood option and the socio-cultural and emotive meanings of migration, as a result of localised body politics. This aspect is crucial for any study of labour migration that takes into consideration the social construction of gender and how it affect the 'lived experience' of migrants. In this vein, Osella and Osella (2006) show how the migration of young men from Kerala to the Gulf countries has become incorporated into the local styles of masculinity. This presents

them with opportunities to win status as wise and secure men, yet threatens male identity if resources are not well managed.

Bringing into focus aspects of structural violence beyond economic domain Walter et al (2004) illustrate its embodiment at the intimate level as a gendered experience of personal and familial crisis, involving love, respect, betrayal and patriarchal failure. Drawing on data collected through clinical practice and ethnographic fieldwork among undocumented Latino day labourers in San Francisco the study illustrate how the constructions of masculine identity organize the experience of social sufferings experienced by the bodies of men who are rendered vulnerable by their undocumented immigrant status. These studies direct attention to the need to understand the social construction of masculine gender in plural forms<sup>1</sup> and its intersections with experience of livelihood in migration. Governmentality as an overarching concept can help to trace the intimate interplay between macro-forces and micro experiences.

### **III Framing migration as a ‘problem’**

Given the important role of discursive practices on ‘development’ in configuring the life and livelihoods of people in Nepal and elsewhere, ‘authoritative’<sup>2</sup> discourses on rural development and how it views the rural population in the Nepal hills -- particularly in relation to their migration and livelihoods – is an important entry point to discern the rationality and mentality behind what is considered as the appropriate mode of governing. An excellent application of Foucauldian concept of discourse in the field of development can be seen in the work of James Ferguson in Lesotho (Ferguson, 1994). Ferguson demonstrates the discourses of development as structures of knowledge that shape the ways in which development projects and programmes are allowed to function. He provides a discursive analysis of the World Bank’s country

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<sup>1</sup> In ‘Gender and Power’ (1987) Connell argued that being a man gave power; and in ‘Masculinities’ (1995) he developed a theory which explains the more differentiated aspects of masculine power.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of ‘authoritative’ (Bakhtin, 1981: 342-343) appropriately articulates the nature of development discourses that demand that we acknowledge them and make them our own. Another important characteristic is the distance i.e. authoritative development discourses are located in a distanced zone and are hierarchically higher. It is a word of fathers whose authority is already acknowledged in the past. ‘It is not a free appropriation and assimilation of the word itself that authoritative discourse seeks to elicit from us; rather it demands our unconditional allegiance’ (Bakhtin, 1981: 343).

report that constructed Lesotho as an agrarian society by simultaneously undermining the presence and importance of labour migration. ‘The homogenizing results of such representations can be almost comical—many reports on Lesotho look as though they would work nearly as well with the word “Nepal” systematically substituted for “Lesotho”’ (Ferguson, 1994: 70).

Any report on different aspects of Nepal’s development starts with a paragraph on the centrality of agriculture and natural resources in the life and livelihoods of the Nepalis. While policies are variably framed by different agencies and regimes there is a uniform voice on agriculture as the most important livelihoods option available to Nepalis, and that it must be the central element in any strategy for economic development in Nepal. The tendency is to homogenizing rural people as farmers without distinguishing between their relationships with the land.(WB, 1998). Interestingly a much quoted report of the World Bank (1998) titled ‘Nepal: Poverty at the Turn of the Twenty First Century’ discusses migration in a paragraph under the subtitle ‘aspects of Nepali poverty’.

The pioneering effort in constructing Nepal as an agrarian society began with a technical agreement that was signed between the government of Nepal and the USOM (US Operations Mission) on 23rd January 1951<sup>3</sup>, followed by the wave of the Green Revolution in the 1960s. Agriculture have remained since one of the most important sectors in the field of international aid and development policies in Nepal. Lack of cheap credit has been upheld in technical assistance as a major assumed reason behind people’s inability to engage in modern agriculture. The credit provision programmes extended to farmers in the 1960s by USAID grew into major assistance from several donors including Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) among others in the 1970s. Simultaneously massive attempts were made to produce new kinds of agriculturalists by setting by agricultural research and training institutions with the support of international aid. A more focussed approach to train agriculturalists in Nepal was initiated with the opening of the Institute of Agricultural and Animal Sciences in 1973. These efforts demonstrate a

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<sup>3</sup> The first team of USOM was heavily weighted toward agricultural expertise, with five agriculturalists in addition to a Chief Agriculturist, who soon became the Mission’s first director (Skerry et al., 1991: 25). Initially a Village Development Programme, introduced in 1952, was used as a vehicle for the extension of new (agricultural) crops and varieties and improved cultivation methods.

shift of rationalities: from subsistence agriculture to rural development more oriented towards a cash economy.

The new rationality took hold in the 1980s and 1990s through development assistance activities. Launched by the World Bank in 1989<sup>4</sup>, a full strategy for small farm commercialisation was developed as a central element in poverty alleviation strategy. Dovetailing this is structural adjustment package imposed by the International Monetary Fund in the mid 1980s (Rankin, 2004), which emphasized the shift towards market-driven agricultural policies. Full privatization transpired in the proposal to abolish subsidies for inputs like irrigation and fertilizer by promoting private sector involvement, based on the assumption that the private sector is best placed to provide high quality goods for the farmers, thus reducing government expenses (Cameron, 1998).

Perhaps the 20 year Agriculture Perspective Plan (APP), which was produced by Agricultural Projects Service Centre in 1995 with the support of Asian Development Bank, best demonstrated the dominance of agriculture in development policy in Nepal. The plan was based on the assumption that the modernisation of agriculture was key to Nepal's development and could be advanced by a combination of technological change and infrastructural development (Cameron, 1998). APP findings suggested that out-migration from the countryside was a result of the lack of income generation opportunities, plus a skewed distribution of that income in the hills and mountains. This re-inforced the rationale for investment in rural development to help people to base their livelihoods on agriculture. The implementation of APP was to be facilitated with a number of large scale infrastructural projects—roads, irrigation, rural electrification etc—and local level programs like micro-finance schemes. The APP was quite powerful in shaping policy drives as it was endorsed by major donors

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<sup>4</sup> In the words of the World Bank “Because 90% of Nepal's population live in rural areas, the key to alleviating poverty lies in improving agricultural performance..... Nepal has not followed inappropriate producer pricing and trade policies and therefore these cannot be blamed for agriculture's poor performance. The major constraint to agricultural growth has been ineffective irrigation delivery, particularly in public irrigation schemes where only a small part of the command area actually receives reliable delivery. (WB, 1989: xiii)



including the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Department for International Development, and Food and Agriculture Organisation among others.

In summary, the development agencies paid scant attention to the significance of migration in people's livelihood. They addressed the subject in demographic terms which cannot reveal the social embedded nature of migration and its meanings the lives of 'rural development' beneficiaries. Strengthened by a neo-liberal approach to livelihoods and resources, authoritative discourses on rural development appear to have silenced issues relating to differentiation between landless and landowners, socio-cultural as well as economic significance of migration, among others issues.

A disjunction appears to exist between the view adopted in rural development policies and programs and the post 1990s era characterized by neo-liberal policies and multi-party democracy. The former represents Nepal as an immobile society dependent on agriculture and natural resources. The later emphasises the significance of remittances as an important element for the development of the country. A reason for the shift is the realisation that migrant remittances form the main source of external income for Nepal exceeding foreign aid. This new shift is a result of an ideology that developed in response to the failure of neo-liberal development policies to reduce poverty. The 'remittance for development' view is rather similar to the 'trickle-down' theory of development. It implies that migrant should pay for the development of their homelands, where international donors and national governments have failed. However, both accounts do not accord significance to migrants' perspectives and how they value their migration experience on terms derived from their own social worlds.

## **ETHNOGRAPHIC SKETCH**

In 2004-2005, I carried out a year long period of ethnographic fieldwork in a hill village in western central Nepal including tracing the experience of young men who travelled to find work opportunities in the Indian city of Mumbai. A typical hill area and a privileged site of development policies and political life in the last 40 years, it was populated mostly with high caste Bahuns and Magar ethnic group, both of which had a history of labour migration to India..

The people were subsistence farmers in the sense that they produce mostly for consumption and not for trade<sup>5</sup>. Almost all households were engaged in diverse economic activities. Employment outside the village, both long and short distance, was an important source of livelihoods for most of the households. In the village, 56 per cent of the households received remittances from their family members working in different locations within and outside Nepal. Nonetheless, people in the village identified farming as their primary occupation, irrespective of the fact that they may depended less on agriculture.

My fieldwork explored the meanings and experience of male labour migration in relation to gendered, familial, social and economic dynamics of those who moved and their networks, from their own perspective.

Let us consider the following ethnographic sketch:

It was about eleven in the morning, in mid October, Pitambar, a Bahun (Brahman) man of thirty four with two of his nephews (about eighteen and twenty years old) were about to leave for Delhi. Pitambar was returning to work in Delhi after *dasai*<sup>6</sup> holidays. At this time he was taking two of his nephews for the first time to Delhi. He had already found a job for one as a domestic worker in Friends Colony and given the demand for domestic workers in Delhi, he was hopeful that he would be able to find work for the other one soon. It was an emotional scene. The two boys in their new clothes were staring at their family members and seemed both nervous and shy. At the same time, some of the members of the family and friends were teasing the two nephews for going to be *lāhures*.<sup>7</sup> The departure scene took about 15-20 minutes where about 10-15 family members and neighbours had gathered in front of the house. Signifying the good luck for travel, those who were leaving had red *tikā*<sup>8</sup> on their forehead and carried fruit (guava). They were not carrying anything other than two small bags. Much focus on the departure was on the boys, who were leaving home for the first time. They were asked to take care of themselves and not become involved in immoral work/behaviour and send news regularly. Pitambar assured his brothers and sister in laws that he would take care of their boys and they need not worry about them. As they left, all the family members gathered and watched them walking away until they disappeared along the trail that led to the main road.

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<sup>5</sup> The agriculture was characterized by cultivation of rice, maize, millet, beans and vegetables, preservation and use of fodder on dry land, and animal husbandry.

<sup>6</sup> It is the biggest festival among Hindus in Nepal. The festival is held on the tenth day of the light fortnight of the month Asvin (September/October) in honour of goddess Durgā.

<sup>7</sup> This term is associated with Nepali men's recruitment in foreign army. The term *lāhure* came from the name of the city of Lahore in Pakistan. It was originally used to refer to the hill men who went to Lahore to work in the Sikh leader Ranjit Singh's army in the early 19th century

<sup>8</sup> Mark placed on the forehead as part of religious worship

In response, the three men turned back frequently and waved. One of the mothers had tears in her eyes, but the grandmother said in an authoritative voice to stop crying at *sāit*<sup>9</sup> of travel. When the three men had left, the gathered people returned to their usual routine.

Whether accompanied by elders or not, the departure of young village men was a common scene in the hill village. Playing loud popular Bollywood (Hindi movie) music, the buses to Butwal (a town in the plains) departed every twenty-thirty minutes from the noisy bus park carrying about twenty-forty passengers. From Butwal their journey continued to Indian border at Sunauli where they separate to different destinations either by train or by bus. Men going to work in India was simply considered the thing to do since old time, as a practice integral to the management of the livelihoods of their households.

### **Practice of *bhāgne***

One of the common themes that ran across most of the stories of the decision making for migration to India was *bhāgne*, a distinctively gendered practice. Adolescent boys left home as young as twelve years old, without consulting their parents, to go to different destinations including different cities in India. They left home in small groups from the village, usually motivated and/or accompanied by some experienced men who worked in India, who came to their village for holidays. In most of the cases, the adolescent boys either borrowed money from their friends or stole money from their parents which provided their travel expenses. In a few other cases, the experienced migrant financed the travel expenses and took them along and eventually found work for them. Those who were unaccompanied by experienced people usually took the address of some of their relatives or neighbours in the destination and lived with them once they reached there. After spending a few weeks in one or two cities, some of them returned home, while others continued to work and came home only after earning money. The boys usually sent letters or messages with someone with an apology for their behaviour.

The experiences of *bhāgne* showed that the boys left as minors but transformed themselves as adults when they returned home. These adolescents heard about life in the cities through radio, returned migrants and through their school text books, which

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<sup>9</sup> The term used to talk about ritually favourable time.

inspired them to explore new places and opportunities. They enjoyed the freedom and transformed themselves into more independent individuals when they were away from the strict control of their parents. Almost any conversation on *bhāgne* was full of giggles and laughter that signified its meaning, which was associated with fun, excitement and a desire to see a distant place. Most of the men who went to work in India started their career of movement to India with *bhāgne* and continued from there. This feature has implications for understanding the practice of *bhāgne* as a *rite de passage* to adulthood.

Ethnic dimensions were important to understand the meaning and significance of *bhāgne* among the village men. Among the high caste Bahuns, the socialisation of children involved strict control with several disciplinary codes. For this reason, *bhāgne* was clearly understood as deviant behaviour in Bahun conception of masculinity. Compared to Bahuns, Magars displayed a more liberal attitude towards childhood and children. Magars considered *bhāgne* a normal part of life among the adolescent boys since it was the providing for the family that was considered an important feature of good men. A Magar mother whose 13 year old son left home a few months previously told me that it was the choice of her son who could not do well in school and the only option available to him was to leave home and explore working opportunities. She heard that her son was working in Delhi and believed that he would be back in a few months, with or without money.

While some adolescents continued to leave home without informing their parents, the frequency of *bhāgne* had reduced drastically in the last two decades. While schooling practices was more common and this led to reduction in *bhāgne* from the village, there was evidence that the pressure of schooling itself led to *bhāgne* among several adolescents. From the perspective of those involved, strict discipline, poor performance and corporal punishment in the school were the major reasons behind their mobility.

### **Survival strategy**

Despite the long tradition, most of the men I spoke to emphasized that they left for India because of the situation back home (*ghar ko awāstha*). They spoke of movement

to India as an escape from the difficult situation back home which at the same time provided them with an opportunity to improve their socio-economic situations and fulfil their obligation as responsible men. The difficult situation at home meant that men were unable to fulfil their obligation in securing the material needs of the household. Irrespective of their ethnic background, it was a common livelihood strategy for men from poor labouring households in the village.

Krishna, a young unmarried Bahun of 19, who was working as a helper in a restaurant in Mumbai, leaving behind his parents and two young sisters back home. When I reached Krishna's house in the village, his father was lying on a mat made of straw (*gundri*) on *pirhi* (veranda) outside the house. Suffering from diabetes and tuberculosis, he could barely work. Krishna's mother was busy working on *bāri* (non-irrigated field) beside their small hut while two of his sisters (aged 6 and 7) were playing in the courtyard with other children from the neighbourhood. The appearance of their house and the family members showed that they represented a relatively poor household. They owned insufficient land to provide them with sufficient grain for the entire year. Depending on the situation, they had to buy grain for 4-6 months (*besāhā*). Krishna's father had been working as a watchman (*chowkidar*) in Delhi for 17 years, which had been an important source of income for the household, until he fell ill two years previously and could no longer go back to work. This meant that the responsibility to earn money had come to Krishna and the only option available was to follow the footsteps of his father and other relatives who had been going to India for work. Eventually, Krishna was to go to Mumbai, supported by his uncle who lived next door. He was excited when his mother told him about the possibility of going to Mumbai with his uncle and he immediately accepted it. Though he had heard a lot about Mumbai and many of his friends had been to India, he had never had a chance to go to Mumbai. His uncle took complete responsibility for paying the fare, accompanying him and finding work. When I met Krishna in a tea stall next to his workplace in Mumbai, he told me that he had been able to send money home on a regular basis. He was planning to go home in the next 3 months but expected to come back to work after a month. When asked why he had decided to come to Mumbai, using the phrase *gharko awastha* he said, 'The situation of my home was not good, so I came with my uncle to find work'. As the only able-bodied man in the family, he felt that he was responsible (*jimmāwār*) for earning money and regularly sending it back

home to ensure the smooth functioning of their household (*ghar chalāune, ghar herne*). Though he did not feel that it was possible for him to earn a lot of money, he nonetheless felt that it was possible to earn reasonable money and improve the situation of his family back home (*kehi awasthā sudhārne, kehi rāmro holā bhanera*). To him, earning money to support his family was vital to ascertain his identity as a son (Osella and Osella, 2000). He was particularly concerned about the health of his father and the education and marriage of his two little sisters. While Krishna's situation seemed to have been triggered by his father's illness, the practice of going to India was not uncommon in his family history and immediate social network. The situation of Krishna is very much similar to that described by Osella and Osella in the context of South India:

For boys in the poorest labouring families, adolescence hardly exists: they move from an impoverished and deprived childhood in which their parents are unable to protect them from the knowledge of adult realities into a young manhood, which immediately demands that they share their share of responsibility by dealing with those realities. Taking on responsibilities at home, bringing cash and paddy, building a new thatched house—all this enables a boy to enter the men's world (Osella and Osella, 2006: 40).

One particular characteristic of those who went to work in India was that almost all of them were unmarried when they started to go to India. In particular I have shown that such constraints were very much related to the masculine identities and the responsibilities of men in the hills of Nepal, and the decision to move was prompted by their desire to protect and prove their manliness. For the village men, life in the village would not always offer opportunities for demonstrating manliness and in many situations it might even constrain it.

Here, it may be useful to look at some historical evidence on agrarian relations during the 19th century, where peasants were compelled to share a proportion of their income with those who did not have a role in the production. Thus the peasants were unable to accumulate capital to increase agricultural productivity (Regmi, 1978). This showed that the importance of going to India was not just as an escape from the exploitative social structure but also that the social structure had an impact on the construction of local categories of manhood. Thus, compared to staying back in the village, going to work in India opened up possibilities of being modern and developed, exploring a distant place and demonstrating the conception of manhood. The village men did not

want to be seen as useless men wondering in and around the village (commonly known as *phāltu*) but aspired to migrate to be known as successful and responsible men (commonly known as *jāgire* or *lāhure*). Development discourse that has had a particular effect in viewing the village as a traditional place to be left in the past and urban areas as modern places to be desired (Pigg, 1992) had impacted on the meanings of movement in the local context. Thus, apart from viewing it as physical movement, movement of people to India or any other place was a movement in the ideological space of development and modernity too. The significance of movement to India lay in the possibility of what it offered to the individual man who moved and the household and how it related to the experience of other men in the community in the context of discourses of development that had an effect in creating rural and urban areas as social categories of differentiation (Pigg, 1992). The similar observation has been made by Mary Beth Mills in her study on young rural women involved in migration process in Thailand. She argues that economic compulsion was often not the major driving force behind women's decision to migrate to Bangkok, but rather it was the desire to participate in a 'modern' (*thansamay*) life (Mills, 1999).

### **Life in Mumbai**

This section examines the life of Nepali men working in Mumbai who displayed ambivalence and complex tension between fulfilling their consumption desire and obligations as men, in the face of difficult circumstances that often put their identity as men into crisis. In Mumbai, Nepali men worked as watchmen, domestic workers and helpers in hotels and restaurants.

For men who arrived in Mumbai working life was very different from their home. Only a few of them were aware of the difficult working and living conditions before they arrived, when they would find that they would be living in a small room shared with 4--6 others in the middle of a slum community in sub urban Mumbai, and work for long hours often in difficult and exploitative conditions.

Commonly known as *caukidār* or *gorkhā* or *bahādur* most Nepalis worked as watchmen who were employed in private bungalows, housing colonies, government offices, factories, hospitals or businesses. Commercialization of the security business under the multinational companies, such as Group Four, meant that the social

networks that long formed the basis of a continuous supply of Nepali men to work as watchman, was slowly getting replaced by formal procedures of recruitment.

The working hours of watchmen were not fixed and it was usual to see these men working overtime, often up to 15-17 hours a day, to earn more money to enable them to save and send money back to their family in Nepal. The monthly salary of watchmen ranged from anywhere between IRs 2500 and 5000 but they were able to earn more money by working overtime and doing other work (e.g.: taking children to the school, cleaning the car, shopping etc) for the residents as well as getting occasional tips from the residents. Though most of the watchmen worked long hours, it was not always possible for them to dramatically change their living condition. Despite this, men I spoke to seemed happy with their jobs though they hoped to find better jobs later. Although a few of them initially felt that the job was difficult and boring, they found it easier as they got used to it. Despite the long working hours, the job as watchmen was particularly important for the flexibility it provided to work overtime and earn more money.

Watchmen were usually given a uniform, a long stick and a whistle, but this was not always the case. Dressed in a uniform, holding long sticks and often with a moustache, the watchmen moved around their building, checked cars and people entering the building and demonstrated their employer's confidence in them. As the owner of the building passed through the gate, they often displayed their obedience and discipline with a salute. The job was considered easier they frequently called it 'stick holding job' (*dandā samātne kām*)—when compared to work in restaurants and domestic help that required long hours of work often in difficult conditions. In the words of one Bahun watchman of 48, the job was very easy as he did not have to do anything other than being there. But the job also involved loneliness as they spent most of their time standing at the gate and often there were hardly anyone with whom they could talk, except the domestic workers staying in or visiting the building or watchmen from the neighbouring building. It was almost impossible for them to get involved in intimacy with others. The difficulty of working as watchmen was when they would be attacked by thieves or they were unable to catch the thieves, which resulted in the loss of the job instantly or deductions from their salary for a few months. However, it did provide an opportunity to obtain a good security and thus



recognition as a more capable person, which sometimes led to an increase in their salary.

Within the constrained life of Mumbai, from the perspective of these men, the movement to India was related to excitement and an opportunity to explore a distant culture and place. For instance Mumbai was a city of big buildings, public transport, brothels, ‘beer bars’, freedom, and the film industry. Working in cities like Mumbai offered these men an opportunity to become involved in consumption of what was considered as modern goods and experiences. Thus, one way to characterize life in Mumbai was the transformation that these men went through in their consumption both in Mumbai and back home. Let me provide some examples of consumption practices in Mumbai.

A particular aspect of life in Mumbai was to go sight seeing to different parts of the city where there were high rise buildings, places of tourist attractions like the Gateway of India, the sea beach and occasionally to see the shooting of films or television serials in studios or outside. Commonly known as *ghumna jāne*, this involved exploring new places for entertainment. Among the people who stayed in sub urban Mumbai, men often went on weekends to watch shooting in the film studios with the help of their friends working there. A few men worked in the film industry or at least came with the hope that they would find some work there. A few young men spoke of the desire to work in ‘shooting’ and watched shooting closely.

Life in Mumbai provided these men with an opportunity to explore freedom away from the strict norms observed in the village. On a Sunday a group of friends (five Bahuns, 3 Magars and 1 Chetri) met in the room of my host in Mumbai. This was called enjoyment (*ramāilo garne*). The gathering on a Sunday was characterized by the consumption of alcohol (beer) and meat (chicken) for hours in the room. Due to strict social norms and recently due to a campaign against alcohol led by the Maoists and women’s groups, it was difficult to find such a scene back in the village, particularly for the Bahuns. The cost of the party that I attended was certainly somewhere between IRs 3000 – IRs 4000 in total. I suspect that it would not have been possible for these men to spend even hundreds of rupees on a party back in the village that they spent partying in the small room in the slum in Mumbai. The

gathering went on for more than 5-6 hours where they drank beer, ate meat, played music, danced and talked to each other about their work, life, loves and problems. Occasionally the gathering took place in the 'Beer Bar' close to where they lived, which cost more money than what they would spend in the room. Though expensive, the 'Beer Bar' was spoken about as a place where they could not just drink and talk, but also have the opportunity to be served drinks by girls and watch erotic dances.

Though a few people I spoke to denied that they went to brothels for sex, they spoke of a few people having girl friends, extra marital affairs and visiting brothels on a regular basis. There was certainly an opportunity for these men to be involved in relationships, particularly when they were away from home, and involvement in relationships provided a rare opportunity for intimacy and it was a matter of pride for a man to assert his manhood. Unlike in their home village, it was possible to see males and females holding hands, walking in the streets and even kissing in public parks and at the sea side.

One of the things that struck me about Nepali men working in Mumbai was their use of mobile phones. Almost all the Nepalis I met had a mobile phone, except for those who worked as a domestic helper. Whenever I began to talk to them a mobile phone would ring with the ring tone of the latest Bollywood song. While having a mobile phone enabled them to be in touch with each other, it was also very easy for their family members back in Nepal to make phone calls to them. Whenever I sought a favour from my informants to speak to other Nepalis, my informants always took out a mobile phone and made the phone call. The difference in the use was visible when we consider how easy it was for these men to talk to their family but, it was a long walk for the people in the village to reach the nearest telephone service. The widespread use of mobile phones shows the desire of these men to consume modern goods.

## **CONCLUSION**

The tendency to conceive people's livelihoods Himalayas in terms of fragility within agriculture or environmental sector has recently been questioned. Gurung argues that it is more realistic to consider mountains as dynamic and not fragile (Gurung, 2004).

This perspective is quite useful not only to provide a critique of discourses on agrarian and environmental crisis in the Himalayas but it also allows one to consider different ways in which people in the Himalayas respond to various forces. Here, the study done by Aase among the people of Manang in Nepal Himalaya (Mananges) provides convincing evidence to show that there was no crisis in the mountains. Instead, his work shows how Mananges have managed to exploit the forces of globalisation in their favour by migrating to different parts of the world (Aase, 2007).

The conception of labour migration as a developmental problem contradicts with established evidence that different forms of migration in/from Nepal was a part of the life experience of a very large number of Nepalis ( Hitchcock, 1961, Hutt, 1997, Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1995, Russell, 2000, Seddon et al., 2002, Thieme and Müller-Böker, 2004, Yamanaka, 2000). It is estimated that as many as 2 million out of 27 million Nepalis live outside of Nepal contributing significantly to people's livelihoods and poverty reduction (Seddon et al., 2002). Instead of labour migration being the by-product of stagnant agriculture, evidence from my fieldwork area suggests that remittances continue to contribute to the sustenance of hill agriculture. Nepali economy earned over USD 1 billion in remittances in 2004 that accounted for 12.4 percent of national GDP when compared to 427.3 million in development assistance (Singh, 2006). Since the people's movement led by Maoists in 1996, migration within and outside of Nepal has been largely responsible for sustaining the rural livelihoods through remittances sent back home (Seddon et al., 2002, Singh, 2006).

In this article I tried to illustrate that given the ethnographic as well as historical evidence on the significance of male labour migration in the hills of Nepal (and other regions in the Himalayan region), its representation as a developmental problem is mistaken, which calls for a critical engagement on the part of social scientists. Here, I wanted to make an invitation to social science research, in particular the role of ethnography, in bringing together evidence from multiple sites (both the policy world and social world) and analyse the disjuncture and politics of international development. Often, ethnographic research produce very significant findings about local culture and social life but these remain untouched by the policy community for its detailed description without clear recommendations. Similarly, policy oriented rapid assessments that seem influential in informing development policies often

appear too quick to make recommendations without sufficient details. However, it must be stressed that the disjuncture is not simply a technical matter, but rather an important part of politics of development (Harriss, 2002, Ferguson, 1994). It is simply not the case that the policy discourses lacked material evidence to support the problems related to migration, but sustaining a particular representation to maintain its authoritative presence appeared to be the politics of international development (Ferguson, 1994, Inda, 2006).

Finally, the contrast between the complicated reality of labour migration and the attempts made by international development to control and manage it is paradoxical. While we have no evidence that development programmes have been able to reduce labour migration, its endless efforts in the sedentary representation of Nepali society to control labour migration through various rural development programs, and attempts to pathologize people who move, shows paradox and politics in it.

Following Spencer on the modern state's attempt to control human mobility and the rise of violent conflict in Sri Lanka, it is possible to see the emergence of the Maoist conflict in Nepal by the same logic (Spencer, 2004). What was particularly revealing was that the areas where the Maoist movement began and proliferated were the same areas where high rates of male labour migration was observed; and that much of the focus of development programs was in similar areas, including the first rural development program in Nepal in the Rapti valley of the western hills. This area of inquiry needs further historical and ethnographic investigation.

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